

The U.N. Regional Seas Programme: How Does It Measure Up?

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The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has become a leading force in developing international environmental regimes. One of UNEP's main programmatic efforts is to address marine water quality management through its Regional Seas Programme. This paper describes the UNEP Regional Seas Programme in terms of its basic structure, goals, and current status; discusses alternative approaches to determine program effectiveness; and presents a process-related evaluation of the program. The Regional Seas Programme currently includes 10 existing action plans, 2 developing plans, and program involvement by over 120 states, 14 bodies of the U.N., and 12 other international organizations. The Programme has been responsible for 11 conventions and 21 supporting protocols. Leveraged financial resources have been in excess of \$40 million above UNEP's direct contributions. However, outside of general comments in UNEP's own publications there is scant evidence in the peer-review literature documenting the outcome-related successes (e.g., environmental improvements) of the program. No articles systematically evaluate the effectiveness of individual action plans or determine how action plans might be improved, either individually or collectively. The analysis is based on the general goals described in the five elements of each action plan: environmental assessment, environmental management, environmental legislation, institutional and financial arrangements.

The analysis shows that the UNEP Regional Seas Programme has had a record of substantial programmatic achievements. The administrative, scientific, political, and financial institutions necessary to address marine pollution issues have been initially established under this innovative program. Although there is always room for programmatic and bureaucratic improvement, UNEP has been able to maintain the continued attention of numerous states to seriously address marine environmental pollution problems. The degree to which this has occurred can be measured directly in the legal instruments and financial obligations of numerous states. However, this brief process evaluation does point out some weaknesses in the overall program. Chiefly the major problems include: difficulty in characterizing environmental problems, narrow focus of environmental management programs and protocols, and inadequate funding by participating states.

The Regional Seas Programme appears to have significantly advanced marine pollution management both regionally and internationally. However, the analyses to date have only measured administrative, financial, and other program activities. The need for a detailed outcome evaluation at this point in the program is critical. The ultimate measure of success must be within the environment itself; the natural world must be the true measure of our national and international efforts.